

# Great Limerick Athletes

## (No. 32)—Michael O'Neill of Kilbreedy

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

**MICK O'NEILL**, of Kilbreedy, Adare, was one of the most famous runners of his time—holder of the Irish record in the five miles flat, and winner of the three miles professional championship of the world at Rochdale in 1900.

He was attracted to athletics by the deeds of the Kildare "phenomenon," little Tommy Conneff, 5 ft. 5 ins. in height, a thin wisp of a lad, whose three-quarter mile record of 3 mins. 2 4/5 secs., at Travers Island, New York, on August 21st, 1895, defied the world's best amateurs for quarter of a century.

Conneff set a powerful headline for the great Irish runners of the early G.A.A. days. Following home triumphs in championships mile and half, the Kildare boy travelled to Manchester in 1886, where a forty thousand crowd cheered his sensational victory in the two miles race against the English crack, Mills of Coventry, and the American holder of many records, E. C. Carter, in the grand time of 9 mins. 44 3/5 secs.

### GREATEST RACE EVER RUN IN IRELAND

The Americans were bitterly disappointed and looked for another meeting with the Irish champion. Conneff was willing, and agreed to a distance at which the Yank was considered unbeatable—four miles. So, in August, 1887, twenty thousand people gathered at Ballsbridge to see what is still reckoned the greatest race ever run in Ireland, the momentous Carter-Conneff duel. Conneff let the American make the pace for nine-tenths of the journey, and they were in the straight, with Carter assured of victory, when Conneff, as if he had got wings from the wind, passed the great American like a streak, to win in the best time ever "clocked" for the distance in this country—19 mins. 14 2/5 secs.

The "Pride of Kildare" later emigrated, and actually competed against the G.A.A. invasion team of 1888, winning the one and five miles at Madison Square Gardens. He was 31, and past his best, when he was beaten by Bacon in 1897, a defeat that the subject of our sketch this week had great pleasure in reversing.

### MICK O'NEILL'S FLYING FEET

Every distance from a quarter mile to five, grass track or cinder, uphill or down, strong wind or dead calm, sunshine or rain, championship or handicap—all came the same to the flying feet of the Kilbreedy runner, who, during his half a dozen years on the track, earned a niche in the love and esteem of true sportsmen that is not easily attained.

Mick O'Neill was twenty-five years old when he had his first outing at an athletic gathering, the occasion being the Adare Sports, and the date, 14th September, 1893, and he proved very successful, capturing three "seconds"—440 yards flat (23 yards handicap), 880 yards flat (45 yards handicap) and one mile flat (95 yards handicap).

Not until the following year did he again compete, when at the same venue he won the half mile and one mile flat events. And later that season he tried his luck at a big sports at the Markets Field and won the self same events in really good times.

### SOME OF HIS GREAT WINS.

In June, 1895, at the Limerick Amateur Athletic and Bicycle Club Sports, he won the one mile flat Championship of Munster under I.A.A.A. Rules, and, on St. Peter and Paul's Day was second in the one mile flat at Kilmallock. Later that season he won the one mile flat championship of Munster

under G.A.A. laws, was second in the four miles flat I.A.A.A. Championship of Ireland, in Dublin, and won every mile handicap in which he competed.

At the L.A.A. and B.C. Sports, on 3rd June, 1896, Mick O'Neill retained his one mile flat championship of Munster, his time being 4 mins. 45 4-5 secs. At the same meeting he won the one mile open handicap event in 4 mins. 29 1-5 secs. On 23rd June, he was again at the Markets Field for the Limerick Commercial Sports and won the one and three mile flat items.

He won his first All-Ireland Championship (under G.A.A. laws), at Jones' Road on the 26th June, 1896, when he covered the "mile" in 4 mins. 52 1-5 secs. In addition, he captured the Dunraven Cup this season, and took, from scratch, every one mile race he entered for.

In 1897 he succeeded in retaining his one mile flat championship of the South, and in that and the following year won many Munster titles ranging from half to five miles. At the I.A.A.A. Championships in 1897 he won the four miles crown, his time, 22 mins. 25 secs., a distinction which he retained in 1898, when he improved the time to 20 mins. 46 1-5 seconds. Another '97 achievement was at Edinburgh, where he won the four miles flat race in the Ireland v. Scotland international.

### HIS LAST YEAR AS AN AMATEUR.

1898 was Mick O'Neill's last year as an amateur and he certainly hit the headlines at the G.A.A. Championships meeting, when he covered the five miles in the record time of 27 mins. 19 4-5 secs, to set native figures that I think have not been displaced. But for some strange reason, the five mile flat is not included in the recorded list of standard championship events, for which best performances are quoted.

At the Ireland v. Scotland International at Ballsbridge he won the "Four Miles," his time being 20 mins. 19 3-5 secs. In all, this year he won sixteen out of nineteen races, his main successes including:—One Mile Handicap, Dublin G.P.O. Sports; One Mile Scratch, St. Michael's Cup, and One Mile Open, Dublin Trades Sports.

### TURNUED PROFESSIONAL.

Having triumphed over all the leading lights of the Irish arena, and beaten Dr. Munroe, the pride of Scotland, Mick O'Neill could find no one to extend him in amateur ranks, so he followed the lead of a great predecessor in the Irish athletic highlights—George Blennerhassett Tincler, regarded by many enthusiasts as the greatest miler of all time, and turned professional.

Tincler was one of the strangest characters that ever graced the native arena. Of aristocratic blood from a proud land-owning family, he was a born Bohemian, ever restless, who broke every rule of training and every rule of regularity, yet won all his races by the length of the straight. And, at 48, this remarkable man ran a mile in less than five minutes for a wager. Tincler was Irish champion under G.A.A. laws in 1892 and 1893. When he first appeared on a track he set everyone laughing by his peculiar gait. He was tall and lanky, with an unusually long neck and sloping

shoulders. His awkward gait, in which there was a marked roll, earned him the nickname of the "Gander." But awkward and all as he looked, he was a running genius, and one of the most lovable figures ever to put on a shoe.

### ITCHING TO TAKE HIM ON.

O'Neill was itching to try conclusions with the "Gander," and friends of the great Adare man maintain that this was one of the big reasons that induced him enter professional ranks.

As far as I can gather, the pair only met once, and O'Neill triumphed. Unfortunately, I can trace no details of what must have been a great race.

Mullen of Belfast was another outstanding professional figure of those days, and O'Neill beat him at Limerick, Tralee, Dublin and Belfast in two, three and four mile contests. He beat Crossland in the "Four Miles" at Limerick, and also scored a similar victory over the Englishman, Fred Bacon, who had challenged the world.

At Ashton-under-Lyne and Southport, Mick O'Neill beat Len Hurst, the French champion, in five and ten mile events, and on the 11th September, 1900, at Rochdale, he won the three miles championship of the world from Watkins. After that he retired from the track, being then in his early thirties.

His trainer in professional days, Walker of Derbyshire, always lamented not having contacted the Adare lad before he reached the age of twenty-one. It was his contention that had he taken up serious training at that age he would have set figures that might never be surpassed.

O'Neill had many invitations to visit America, but despite much pressure, and the certainty of fresh laurels, he refused.

When he retired, Mick settled down to farming, his main sporting interest being the management, as whip, for a number of years, of the Stonehall Harriers pack.

### WHAT "CARBERY" WROTE.

When Mick died in May, 1942, "Carbery" had this to say of him:

One of Ireland's finest distance runners of a past generation has died at the round age of 74. The name of Mick O'Neill of Adare rings high in the annals of Irish athletics. In my schooldays "O'Neill of Adare" was linked with George Blennerhassett Tincler of Dublin and Fred Bacon of England as leading contenders for the world's professional distance title, and I had the pleasure of seeing the great O'Neill run his last race in public. After a long absence from the track, he ran a three miles race at Crosshaven Sports in 1907, and was the centre of all eyes.

A lovely figure of a man, five feet 10 1/2 ins. or so, he was still a fine runner when he returned for a brief session to the track. What I noticed about him was that he ran the whole three miles on his toes—reminiscent of his crack professional days. Remarkable about Mick O'Neill was that he was past twenty-five years before he donned a running shoe. He won some local races easily in 1893 and 1894; a year later he won the Munster Mile Championship a

Tipperary; he won his first Irish mile title at Jones's Road, Dublin, in 1896, and in Cork Park in 1898 he set up new figures when covering 5 miles in 27 mins 19 4/5 secs. He won four mile titles under the I.A.A.A. in 1897 and 1898, when he ran a great four miles at Ballsbridge, beating Dr. Munroe of Scotland in 20 mins. 19 secs. on a moderate track.

### THREE MILES CHAMPION OF THE WORLD.

Influential neighbours then induced O'Neill to turn professional, and he ran successfully in England and Scotland, and became three miles champion of the world before he retired at the age of thirty-one to follow his first profession of farming. Had O'Neill taken up distance running earlier he would have set up staggering figures.

Always fond of horses and hunting, O'Neill settled down to the life he wanted in his native territory of West Limerick, and for many decades he was in at the kill with the Stonehall Harriers. A highly respected citizen, he could be seen of recent years conveying his milk churns to the creamery to-day and leading the hunt near the Shannon estuary to-morrow. No less a judge than Denis Power, of Blackwalter, told me he saw O'Neill run a 4.20 mile in his prime. He frequently covered 4 miles under twenty minutes. A great-hearted runner, he was proudest of his defeat of Bacon, the English champion, in an international match. Peace to his ashes.

33—Ned O'Grady of Caherconlish.